

THE REMOVAL COMPANY.

By W. C. Morrow.

IT is hardly strange that my best and oldest friend, widowed and dying, should have given into my charge her little daughter, Annette, for there was none other so strongly bound to this obligation, none toward whom that gratitude which lives beyond the grave extended a hand of gentler appealing. Nor did it seem at that time so serious an undertaking. Annette was sweet and gentle and quiet and obedient, studying my wishes and trying to follow their course, seemingly putting aside her own great sorrow in my presence and investing her demeanor with the full strength of her brave young heart. I knew little about children then, or I should not have been blind to the womanly conduct of this strange child. Now I have some idea of her suffering, which she kept so bravely from me, of that consuming yearning with all her childish heart for the touch of a mother's hand and the music of a mother's voice; and I know now how greatly she needed the kindly guidance of a level purpose and an even heart.

I thought I was doing the best I could. I imagined that the responsibility of the charge found proper estimation in my plans, in my conduct, and in my wishes. If there was a sense of oppression under it my gratitude would have masked it. So, being too young and unsettled to establish a household with Annette as my family, I put her in a convent. It never occurred to me to imagine that this sharp separation contained any element of a riddance, nor did there come up any formed hope that Annette, so desolate and lonely, so gentle, unselfish and retiring, might choose to become a conventual, upon which consummation my responsibility would cease, of course. When I spoke to her

of going to school in a convent her sad face brightened, and then instantly it fell.

"What is it, Annette?" I asked.

"I can never see you then."

"Oh, yes," I said, "for I shall go to see you every week."

She looked up at me quickly. "You will come *every* week?" she asked.

"Yes; every week."

"Because," she added—but why did she use that word "because?" of what was it an explanation and for what a reason?—"because," she said in her sweet, low, childish voice, slightly tremulous, "you are all I have in the world."

I caught her up in my arms and kissed her for that, and this surprised her very much, for it was the first time I had ever caressed her, but that was because I knew so little about children. She went to the convent, and the years of her life began their steady course—with what loneliness, with what suffering, with what longings, with what numberless little cares and anxieties, with what small pleasures and diversions I did not know, for Annette was reticent, and it never occurred to me to inquire. My promise of visits suffered many violations, but my brave little girl never complained. There was always the same quick but transitory happiness which lighted up her pretty face when I would visit her; but there was otherwise a habitual sadness, growing deeper and surely merging into melancholy. And to my surprise she refused religious comforting—not that I was religious, but—I really did not know why her refusal troubled me. At times she talked sparingly but fearlessly a philosophy which made the good women there despair; these things they told me with concern.

The time came when I awaited with anxiety the day of her graduation, now close at hand, for responsibility

at last had laid a hand upon me; its effect upon an erratic bachelor, not old enough to be Annette's father, was disquieting. Was there any element of selfishness in this feeling? Had I been a churl in failing often to visit Annette?—for when I did go I always took her some little present, and she was grateful for it. Could I not have gone oftener and taken her more presents? Could I not have staid longer and been gentler and kinder to her, and told her things of the outside world to cheer her? Thus ran my thoughts, quickened possibly by conscience, as I sat in the very rear of the great room on graduation day, well concealed, I thought, by the large crowd present. Thus ran my mind as I sat and gazed in wonder at my Annette (for was she not my ward?) as she sat upon the platform with other girls. Could this beautiful girl be Annette? It must be, for she was so small, so fragile, so pale, so invested with an atmosphere of loneliness. In all that great room filled with people I saw only my little Annette; and never had I seen so pretty, so dainty, so exquisite a picture. I was glad she did not see me; I would let her know afterward that I had been there, and this would prove that I had not neglected her. She held the flowers which fortunately I had thought to send her, and her manner showed that by some accident I must have sent the kind she liked best; for in very truth I had ransacked San Francisco before I found any that I thought were good enough for Annette. But what meant this new look of trouble in her face? It appeared to be evidence of a tangible pain. A fear that the excitement had proved too great for her possessed me, and a strong pity was aroused. There was a strained expression in her eyes, whose glance wandered unceasingly over the vast audience, up and down, row by row, face by face, until the radiance from their unfathomable blue depths fell full upon me; and then instantly a bright flash of recognition, followed by a soft pink flush which rivaled the dainty coloring of

her roses, swept over her face, and then a faint smile of pride and happiness, and her glance fell to the floor. At that moment there burst upon me unaccountably, with so fierce assailing that it stunned, the realization, all unexpected, all unguarded against, that my little Annette was a woman.

It was some days before I could recover full possession of myself, for by some unexplained means I had been thrown into a condition of wilder disorder than was customary even with me. Vaguely was Annette associated with this condition, and with a certain impatience I felt a resentment toward her—toward innocent, unhappy, unselfish Annette; and it added somewhat to my resentment to reflect that she was now eighteen, and beyond the legal reach of my protecting guardianship. It is true, she had no means for her maintenance, but I should not grudge her that from my modest earnings. This charge upon my income doubtless would keep me from marrying and having a home with all its sweet comforts, but was Annette to blame for that? and did this weaken the force of my obligation? And then, she might marry or become self-sustaining —. But at that moment the following note was brought to me:

"MY DEAR GUARDIAN: You have not been to see me since the day of my graduation, but I am glad to know that you have not been ill. Perhaps it is better that you did not come, for I know that I should not have had the courage to thank you for all that you have done for me. How can I thank you now? Every word, look, and act of kindness from you through all these past years will remain a precious recollection.

"Pardon me, my friend; but I can live no longer upon your bounty. I am a woman and of legal age, and my first right and duty are to maintain myself. Knowing your generosity and unselfishness, I must not let you know whither I go, but if all goes well with me you shall know.

"Farewell, by best, my dearest friend.
ANNETTE."

The blow was swift and cruel, but above all other feelings there struggled to the front one of bitter chagrin. So Annette had run away from me; so, after all, it was proved that I was nothing to her, and that now, when she was armed to make her own fight for life, she had no further use for me; so, she believed that my friendship was worthless, my guidance and assistance useless; and thus Annette had shaken me off as an ugly dream, leaving me bruised, humiliated, cut to the heart.

As the days passed by my resentment softened, and then there came upon me a fear that Annette's mind was deranged. Sometimes long ago I feared it, but not expected it. If I should find her with her mind awry, my duty would be clear; but if it should be otherwise how could I thrust my presence and friendship upon her? Her conduct had been a sufficient hint. The weeks passed, and my fear for her safety grew steadily. It looked bad that not a word had come from her. San Francisco was hardly large enough to afford absolute concealment, but it was large enough to starve in. How could Annette, with her dainty tastes, shrinking disposition and fragile body earn a livelihood there? Would she rather starve than be near me?

My fears finally impelled me to make a search, and for this purpose I employed a man named Greatwood. "I do not wish to see her," I instructed him, "nor does she wish to see me. If you find her tell her nothing, but report to me."

It was a harder task than I had imagined, but one day Greatwood came to me with a strange expression on his face. "I have found her," he said, "and she is in a very bad situation."

"Tell me about it, Greatwood," I begged, for his words gave me a quick, measurable pain and a great eagerness.

"Well," he said, "she has been sewing and trying to teach, but she was not strong enough, and her health

broke down. It is a wonder she has lived so long. The people in the house have been kind to her, but she refuses to accept food from them, protesting that she is not in need of it. Matters reached a climax only last night. Some one heard a strange noise in the room—a very slight sound, but sufficient to attract the attention of a nervous woman in an adjoining room. She roused her husband, and they went to the girl's room. The door was locked; there was no answer to their calls and rapping. They burst open the door——"

"Is she still alive, Greatwood?" I gasped, springing to my feet.

"Yes; but they found something worse than her attempt."

"What was it, man?"

"She was starving."

"Come, Greatwood," I cried, "take me to her."

"But you said——"

"Come—there is not a moment to lose."

We went as fast as horses driven furiously could take us. Oh, what a shabby, wretched place for Annette! and the poor, bare room in which she lived! I went straight to the bedside and gently raised the slight, emaciated form of my poor Annette—my Annetta, I say—and pressed her to my heart. She knew me, and feebly put her arms around my neck—the first time she had done this in all her life.

"I didn't think you would care to see me," she faintly said, and tears of happiness streamed down her wan cheeks; and there came into her beautiful blue eyes just such a look as that which lighted them up on the day when she found me in the great crowd at the convent. The doctor who had been summoned that night to attend her had left an injunction that she be given a broth; but the women there told me that she had refused to take it. I ordered another at once. Annette watched me all the time, but said nothing, and her tears continued to flow. I was sure that I tried very hard to be kind and gentle with her. I said little, because she was very weak.

I gave issue to not a word of chiding—how could I? But for all that there must have been something in my manner that disturbed her, for she soon became restless. What was there lacking in my conduct? Was it sympathy? Surely I felt it with all my heart. It is true, I could not forget Annette's past treatment of me—not that it should affect either my sympathy or my sense of duty, but that it indicated her dislike of my care and attention. I felt that I was guilty of a rude intrusion upon her now; for I was interfering in a matter that lay wholly between her and her Maker; and I found in her desolate condition a sufficient explanation of the fleeting happiness which she felt upon seeing me. This had worn off quickly enough, but not sooner than I had expected. Even before the broth arrived my presence had apparently become a positive annoyance to her. I offered her the broth. She shook her head. I pleaded earnestly with her. Her look hardened all the more.

"But you must, Annette," I said.

Her eyes flashed with a quick look of defiance.

"No—come closer. Send the others away; I want to tell you something. . . . You are and always have been very kind to me . . . much kinder than I deserve or have ever deserved. . . . I can never repay you, because . . . I shall not live long enough."

"Annette!"

Her eyes brightened and a flush came into her deathly pale cheeks.

"It is true," she said, speaking more rapidly—"it is true. I am determined to go."

"What do you mean, Annette?"

"You know what I mean," she gasped, struggling to raise herself upon her elbow. "You know what I mean."

I knew then, for even if her words had failed to convey her dreadful meaning, the resolution in her beautiful eyes would have been sufficient information.

"You know what I mean," she repeated, "and it will be worse than cruel in you to interfere."

In spite of my philosophy; in spite of my belief in those unhappy days that the right to take one's own life was inherent, sacred, and inalienable; in spite of my conviction that none had the right to interfere and that all would better be dead than living; in spite of my opinion that among all those whom I knew—the sore afflicted, the deranged, the unhappy, the abandoned and desolate—none could find a happier release in death than my poor Annette,—in spite of all these things my heart seemed to die within me when a full realization of her terrible determination broke upon me. For my conscience was alarmed, and the memory of neglected visits and other attentions and kindnesses was aroused into unhappy activity. Possibly I could have made her life brighter and kept at bay the gloom and sense of loneliness that had become despair.

But what could be done? I knew that Annette was proud, and that the end of all things with her had come. Despite her generous effort to show appreciation of the little that I had done for her so meanly, I saw that my presence was irksome and my influence an evil. What could I do?

"Annette, do you not think it is wrong to do what you contemplate?"

"Ah, yes," she replied, sinking back upon her pillow and covering her face with her hands.

"Then," said I, "you know you should not do it. I don't wish to dictate to you or preach a sermon, but let me assure you, Annette, that violence to conscience is unnatural and unholy, and that it is unworthy of you. Think well, my child. . . . And if I do not seem indelicate—how can I say without wounding you, Annette, that you need not fear the lack of such friendship in substantial form as I am able to give you?"

There was a long silence, and I knew that she was sobbing. Hope quickened within me, only to be strangled at once, for Annette brokenly said this:

"I appreciate your kindness and

thank you with all my heart, but—but—I am determined."

Should I resort to harsh measures to restrain her? That would be mean and cowardly. . . . Annette must go. . . . That deadening realization forced itself upon me. . . . I would not interfere with the exercise of a right which I considered sacred. . . . Only one thing was left for me to do—I must be a friend now.

"Annette," said I, "if you have the strength to listen to me I will tell you something very strange, and suitable only for the ears of those who contemplate the end with the willing mind of one anxious to accomplish it. It will not save you to me, but it will save your conscience to you, and your wish will be gratified without outrage to your sense of right."

Annette fixed a very earnest look upon me.

"I don't understand how that can be," she said.

"You are too weak. Take some of this broth, and then I will tell you a thing exceedingly strange and of the deepest interest to you."

With surprising confidence in me, she swallowed the broth, and its good effect soon became manifest; and when a little color had come to her cheeks and a healthier brightness to her eyes, I told her substantially the following:

"I have a friend named Reiferth, a German of about my own age, and he and I have the same ideas concerning the matter that is in your mind. Now, as a fear of punishment in a future life deters many from committing the act who would be better off if not so restrained, Reiferth conceived the idea of forming a company which would undertake, for an ample consideration, to remove from this life, without inflicting pain, those who earnestly wish to go but fear to take the step for one reason or another, and who will submit themselves to the company to do for them what they fear to do for themselves. I refused, much to Reiferth's surprise, to become a member of the company; whereupon he charged me with inconsistency, and

maintained that the purpose of the company was wholly noble and humane. I believed that it was, but I did not desire to embark in such an enterprise. Reiferth then declared that, knowing the scheme to be unlawful and its practice attended with the gravest dangers, with the penitentiary or the scaffold a constant menace to its success, I was afraid to become his associate. I made no rejoinder to that charge. Then Reiferth asked me to help him if it should come in my way, and I promised that I would. Reiferth put his plan in operation in the very heart of San Francisco, and there is evidence that he has prospered amazingly.

"Annette," I said in conclusion, "I offer you this opportunity for accomplishing your purpose without doing violence to your conscience. What do you think of it?"

[I have no desire to justify myself in this matter, nor to deny the right of criticism which the unusual position here advanced may invite; but while I know that the scheme here proposed may be denounced as but a form of suicide, and that its acceptance would bring all the penalties supposed to attach to that act, I have to say that I see little difference between its essence and that of knowingly acquiring habits and following practices which lead to the same result. It was important in this case that I impress upon Annette the idea of avoiding outrage to her conscience.]

Annette had listened with an interest that absorbed every faculty; and when I had finished she sat upright in great excitement, and somewhat to my dismay she said:

"Do you know where the place is?"

"Yes."

"What is it called?"

"The Removal Company."

"Will you take me to it?"

"Annette,—"

"Will you?"

"Immediately?"

"Yes; now."

"You are not strong enough, Annette."

"I am perfectly well," she responded, springing to her feet and commencing a few preparations.

With a heart so heavy that it almost dragged me to the floor I left the room and found my carriage still waiting. I went upstairs again, and Annette at once took my arm and walked firmly down to the street. So strange a numbness possessed me that I hardly believed I was in my right mind. In the carriage Annette, who was now all eagerness and activity, saw that something was wrong with me.

"Why," she cried, "you are ill!"

"I think not, Annette."

"I am taxing you too greatly—I am asking too much of you, . . . but it will soon be over."

We arrived at the quarters of the Removal Company—a silent old brick house, with little exterior sign of occupancy. It was not far from the long warehouses that lie under the afternoon shadow of Telegraph Hill, and was in one of those districts which a vagrant fashion of migration had left a mere trace of former enterprise. Within the house all was brightness and modest luxury. Reiferth was a man of taste. He welcomed us very cheerfully. "I am sorry to see you ill, though," he said to me. He had a kind and gentle manner, and he handled with the utmost tact and delicacy the business in hand. I was hardly able to stand when Annette advanced to bid me farewell. Tears were in her eyes and she was pale, but her determination was firm and her courage unflinching. She took my hand and looked up into my face long and searchingly. What sought she there, if anything?

"Farewell, my friend," she said in a clear voice and with infinite tenderness.

"Annette,——"

But she stopped my words by throwing her arms around my neck, and before I could realize anything she had fled my presence, going with Reiferth to another part of the house. As soon as I could order my understanding I followed, but the door by which they

had left was locked. No longer could I stand; an unaccountable weakness seized me, and I sank into a chair. There I sat an indefinite time in a stupor, and was thus sitting when Reiferth returned.

"Well?" I gasped.

"It is all over," he said kindly. Then he quickly brought me some brandy, which he made me drink.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"Upstairs."

"May I see her?"

"Why—no. I—I—don't think you ought."

"But I wish to."

After some further demur he yielded. He supported me up the stairs and into a room. On a lounge lay Annette. At the door my heart had bounded with gladness, for she appeared to be only sleeping; but when I had come nearer—I cannot write of all these terrible things even at this great distance of time. I had come to bid my poor Annette farewell now, for I could not, I could not in life.

"Please leave me, Reiferth," I begged.

When he was gone I took the slight body in my arms and pressed it close, very close to my heart. I covered the white, dead face with kisses. I kissed her hair and her sightless eyes, once so beautiful, and caressed the poor sunken cheeks.

"Ah, Annette," I cried, "my own little Annette, my Annette, I can tell you now what I have learned this day—that I love you; that I love you with all my heart and soul, and have loved you thus since the day when you sought and found me in the great crowd at the convent. How blind and foolish I was, Annette! And now you are gone, and my heart is broken."

Reiferth came and took the poor dead body out of my arms and kindly led me away. My poor Annette!

More than a year had passed, and I was standing listlessly on a street corner in Philadelphia. I could not live in San Francisco, for everything

there was eloquent with the memory of Annette. Darkness was approaching rapidly. I still stood, with that same dull pain which came upon me when Annette started down stairs with me to the carriage. The night was coming on cool wings, but its presence was soft and gentle. There was a shy touch on my elbow, and when I looked around I saw a beggar. She was small and slight, and was dressed in faded black. A black straw hat, with poor, cheap, faded lace, shaded her face from the street-lamp.

"Will you please give me a little money, sir?" she pleaded. "My husband has gone away, and I have nothing to eat, and my poor baby is starving."

It was not the voice alone that came to me out of infinite distance; there came crowding with it a thousand memories and all the anguish of a blasted life. I was a broken man, carrying existence heavily, but the eagerness which surged up within me swept aside all the torpor of my being. Some strange movement must have alarmed the woman, for she quickly raised her face . . . and there was not a trace of recognition in her eyes.

"Annette!" I cried. "You know me—your guardian—your old friend, who reared you from infancy—Annette!"

"I—I don't know you," she replied, with pitiful fright. "I am not Annette—I never had a guardian"; and honesty shone luminous in every word.

"But you *are* Annette," I protested, aghast, "and you must come with me."

"No, no!" she cried, with worse fright still; and then she turned and ran away.

I would not let her go so easily. I sprang forward and caught her, and held her firmly.

"Do you hate me so much as this, Annette?" I asked with angry and unreasoning bitterness. "Tell me so, and I will let you go."

"I don't hate you—I don't know you—you are mistaken. Let me go.

I am afraid of you. I will cry out, and you shall be arrested."

I released her, and she hurried away. Was there really some dreadful mistake? Was it possible not to be certain of that low, sweet voice, those beautiful eyes (now strangely dull), that look of indescribable sadness, that small frail form, those exquisite graces of pose and movement? But if it were she, how could she, so honest and innocent, so much a stranger to deceit, conceal her surprise upon encountering me, and how assume entire ignorance of me? Here was a strange mystery—or—had I gone mad and taken to finding Annette in shadows? I glanced after her, and in the distance saw her hurrying along, fear lending fleetness to her step. Had I forgotten that Annette was dead?—but would not even her spirit know me? Without a thought of what I did I hurried after the flying form, which distance and darkness were absorbing—I would not lose Annette again. I went forthwith in pursuit, holding my pace within the necessities of its mission, getting a firmer hand upon my eagerness, and looking to the ordering of my purpose; for if ever a man needed to be bold yet cautious, firm yet gentle, fearless in strange, dark perils and reliant upon the evidence of his senses, that man was I. Enough had come forth already to distract my faculties; but Annette, dead or alive, had stood before me, and I would follow her now whithersoever the love which bound me to her might lead.

Without once having looked back, Annette arrived in a dark street, slipped quickly into a door, and in a moment a tall, ugly house had swallowed her up. I was now close behind her. I tried the door. She had bolted it. I rushed upon it madly, burst it open, and sent it flying against the wall with a crash that resounded throughout the depths of the house; and as I did so I saw Annette—for I must call her so—clearing the top step. She turned and saw me, and fled with a cry. Never bounded a deer with swifter leaps than mine. I was close

upon her in a dimly lighted hall, when she flung open a door, cried "Mother!" in a choking fright, and as I pushed into the room threw herself into the arms of a strange, sinister woman, wrinkled and bent with age. There the poor girl, her face buried in the woman's shoulder, sobbed and gasped and trembled in a very agony of fear. In a moment a powerful man of middle age came hastily into the room behind me, and stepped to one side to see me better. Other men followed him—men with dull, vacant faces, whose blankness would have impressed me at another time; but through all these faces and circumstances, through the turbulence of my emotions and the fierce energy of my purpose, there arose and stood forth the fact that this strong man and I were enemies—that between us two lay the settlement of this affair, and a dark pit yawned for him who should fall. He was the old woman's son; thus spoke his sharp eyes, somewhat dulled with drink, and his high cheek bones, like hers; the pose of his head and certain tokens of manner—all a copy of his mother's; but where coarse and brutal in him, sharp and cruel in her. Upon his body he wore only a woolen shirt, open at the breast, the sleeves rolled up, and upon his lower limbs coarse trousers.

"Well," said the man, his voice deep and his manner menacing, though betraying a puzzled mind, "who are you an' what yer tryin' to skeer them women to death fer?"

Annette, controlling a sob, raised her face upon hearing his voice, and looked at him gratefully.

"Joe," she said faintly, "I'm so glad you are here. You won't let him hurt me, will you, Joe?"

"Not as long as them hands kin close up a windpipe," responded the man, making a significant prehensile movement with his fingers; "but I don't think nobody wants to hurt yer, Bess. Now go to the baby."

Annette started and her lips opened. With a little cry she ran to a cradle in the corner—a very poor and shabby

cradle—and tenderly lifted a sleeping infant. "Poor little angel," she crooned. "Did you think your mother had forgotten you?"

Its mother?

"Whose child is that?" I asked the man, and he noted the threat and challenge in my voice.

"I don't know what right you have—"

"I have a right, and we will not discuss it," I peremptorily interrupted.

"— to come here an' raise this rumpus an' skeer a couple o' women, but if you'll be decent an' kind, like, about it, you kin ax my sister herself."

"Who is your sister?"

"Bess, there." He motioned toward Annette—Annette, gentle, dainty, refined; full of the softest graces—Annette the sister of this ruffian! "Come, Bess," said he, "brace up an' answer this man's questions. I won't let him hurt yer. You're jest as safe as you ever wuz in yer life. Tell him what he wants ter know, and tell it straight up 'n' down."

Thus encouraged—and, I could see, half commanded also—Annette (for I must call her that yet) turned and looked at me for the first time since I had entered the room. All hope that she might recognize me in the stronger light was dissipated instantly; she regarded me only with fear and uneasiness. I approached her closer.

"Annette," I said, removing my hat and looking down into her face as she sat holding the child—

"My name is not Annette," she hastily interjected.

"What is your name, then?"

"Elizabeth. My mother and my brother Joe call me Bess." This, looking up at me in the fullness of honesty, but perplexed and fearful.

"What is your other name?"

"Hartly. That is my husband's name."

I staggered under that blow, and the sharp eyes of the old woman and her son were fastened upon me with a steady gleam that burned.

"Whose child is that?" The words

came with effort from a great depth within me.

"It is mine. Her name is Pearl. I am her mother."

Thereupon I went all astray from myself, and looked around with helpless dismay. The four sharp eyes were consuming me. Annette—may I so call her yet?—gazed steadily up at me with all her old gentleness and sweetness, but still with fear and anxiety. Beyond the four burning eyes were the faces of men who stared in blank stupidity. I looked down at Annette, and there too I saw now, not clearly, if at all, something of the stamp of vacuity which was upon the faces of these ragged men grouped near the door. I was groping in a gloomy path beset with deep pits, and I breathed uncertain dangers. The four eyes burned me with a glowing heat. In a tangle of betrayed senses I essayed a persistence which I hoped would drag Annette forth from what I conceived to be some grim and overmastering constraint.

"Where is your husband?" I asked.

Annette was puzzled or cautious, for her glance flew for help to the man Joe.

"Where is your husband?" I pressed it upon her, feeling that I possibly had touched a spring. The man's sharp gaze was transferred from me to her.

"Answer him fair, Bess," he said, not unkindly; "give him the straight truth."

"He has gone to sea," answered Annette, looking up at me in a wondering and troubled manner.

"When did he go?"

She appeared to be thinking very hard and sounding her memory for an honest answer.

"It was while I was ill," she finally said with some suddenness, and with much pride in her victory of recollection.

"You have been very ill?"

"Oh, yes; very ill indeed."

"When was it?"

"It was when my baby was born." (Here she began to speak with a

quick, nervous energy.) "I didn't know it until a long time afterward—I was so very ill—and my husband was not with me. When I recovered I had forgotten I was married. I was in a strange——"

"Stop there, Bess," fiercely cried the man. She obeyed instantly and trembled. "You've got one o' them spells o' your'n agin, an' yer tellin' what yer don't know, an' yer lett'n' yer tongue run away with yer senses. Forgot yer husband! Forgot yer was married! Maybe you've forgot I'm yer brother."

"No," faintly protested the girl, regarding him with wide eyes; "no, Joe; I haven't forgotten that, but I forget so many——"

"Who's this woman 'ere?" demanded the man, indicating his mother.

"My mother. But, Joe——"

"Shut up! You've got one o' them crazy spells agin. Now, mister," added he, turning angrily upon me, "it's about time yer cleared out o' here, ain't it?" With increasing anger he continued: "You chased this here girl to her house, an' smashed in the door like a wild beast, and tore in here like as if you was goin' to murder the poor thing, an' now you've set her wits loose an' brung on another o' them wanderin' an' fergettin' spells. That's why I say you'd jist better clear out."

The man was in a rage; and, seeing that I did not move, he stepped to the chimney and took an axe-handle from the corner. At this juncture the old woman came out of her silence.

"No, Joe," she said with a strong, quiet firmness; "don't lose yer head, my son, for yer need a cool brain an' a stiddy nerve right here and right now. There's jist a misunderstandin' summers, an' it'll come out all right." Joe became quiet, and his mother turned to me and said: "You look lack a gentlemun, sir, an' no doubt you air; an' yer don't look lack you'd been a-drinkin'; but you'll allow you've acted very queer—I might say outrageous-like—an' my son ain't to be blamed fer gittin' mad at yer. Now, to save

my blessed life I don't know what yer drivin' at, but I b'lieve yer actin' on good principles and have mistook this girl fer summon else, 'cause you've been callin' her Ninette, or somethin'. You suspec' there's somethin' wrong, an' yer think yer know the girl, an' want ter get her out o' this scrape." And so the woman talked on, reviewing the whole situation with uncommon skill, reminding me that the girl did not know me, that in all her answers she had tried to tell the truth so far as a shattered mind would permit. The woman closed a long speech by going into a tedious history of the girl's life and assuring me that unrestricted opportunity would be given for an official investigation on the morrow. But the whole of this fine effort passed without effect upon me.

"No!" I exclaimed. "I will not trust her another night in your devilish hands. There is some crime here of so damnable a character that it overwhelms your lies. I will spare you the law on condition that you stand aside and let me take away this girl in peace."

Upon saying that I picked up Annette and her child and advanced toward the crowd that held the passage to the door, but the fury of the man Joe escaped restraint, and he sprang before me with his weapon aloft.

"No!" he cried with an oath; "not while I'm alive."

In an instant I had put Annette aside and sent a chair flying through the glass window. I leaped to the opening it made and cried out with all my strength. The call for help went bounding up and down the street from other throats, and swift feet were set in motion. I glanced back upon my enemies. The furious ruffian, taken unawares, had stood a moment in a stupor; but now, having roused himself, he came upon me with the one purpose of killing me. At that moment the shrill whistle of a policeman, always a thing which strikes upon one's sensibilities much as a physical blow, went at large upon the night and

thrilled all the ruffian's nerves and drew the sap from his purpose; pallor swept over his face, his hand dropped.

"Joe," called his mother, in sharp anxiety, "git them fellers away quick an' come back here. *We'll see yit.*"

The man, quickened by a sense of danger, hustled away the dumb blank creatures and returned simultaneously with two officers, who headed a procession of frightened and curious people.

"Shut the door," I called out. The officers came within and the door was closed upon the crowd.

"Who was it called for help? What is the matter?" asked one of the officers.

"It was I who called," I answered.

"Oho, Simpson!" said the same officer, addressing Joe. "Trying to do this man, eh? You've been quiet so long that I thought you had given up that sort of thing and was sticking to the begging business. . . Well, what has he been trying on you, sir?" concluded the officer, addressing me.

"Nothing, I assure you," I replied, "but this girl, whom I have known from her infancy—I found her here and would have taken her away, but this man tried to kill me. I want you to help me rescue her from this fearful den."

"That girl with the child? Oh, she's one of Simpson's best beggars!"

Upon his requesting it, I gave a relation of all that had happened since I first saw Annette on the street. "She is one of his beggars, you say," I added; "there is yet a deeper and more damnable infamy. They say she is married. It is a lie; but see, she is a mother!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the officer, fixing a hard look upon Simpson, who, engaged within grave suspicions, appealed with his eyes to his mother. She thereupon said:

"I'd lack ter speak a word private to this gentleman."

"I went with her into a corner of the room, and we whispered."

"What yer want ter do, sir?" she asked.

"I intend to take this girl to the police station."

"Ah, well! She's demented, like; an', 'twixt you an' me, I ain't sorry ter git rid of her."

"You and your son also will go to the station, but as prisoners, to be tried and punished for your crimes."

This to her was not unexpected; but she fastened her gaze upon me with a penetrating, sinister, unwavering manner, and it hurt.

"I don't think you'd better do that," she said, not relaxing her gaze, and speaking very slowly. "Once there was a man what connivered in schemes fer to remove people what didn't have the sand fer to kill themselves, an' when some folkses found it out they blowed on him, an' he spent the rest of his life in the state's prison."

"Me 'n' my son don't want no trouble with you, an' you don't look lack a gentlemun what's got a wobbly tongue."

I left her and returned to the officers. Annette sat holding her child tenderly, but with a look so pathetic and helpless, so confused with fright and a shaken consciousness, that while I yearned to comfort her I could see that whatever little mind she had was drifting away. I said to the officers:

"I wish to take this girl and her child to Dr. Arnold's hospital. Will you kindly help me?"

"And Simpson goes to the station?" I heard the sharp clinking of handcuffs.

"No—not to-night; there is time for that. Help me in the present urgency."

Annette's resistance was slight, and there was no other. She sobbed all the way in the carriage, and talked incoherently to her fretting child. She was made comfortable at the hospital, but she sobbed continuously. "Her dementia," said Dr. Arnold, "is almost complete. The shock has been too great." I took him wholly into my confidence, omitting not even the Removal Company and Annette's experience there. He asked me many questions; his mind was quicker and deeper and shrewder than mine. "Without knowing it," he said, after a

long silence spent in pacing the floor, "you have unearthed a singular and original form of crime. The Removal Company has never killed any one."

I looked at him amazed and incredulous.

"Not one," he continued. "The victims were simply treated with a drug which destroyed their minds partly and their memory wholly. Are you so confiding as to believe that Reiferth would have dared take any one's life? The risk was too great, and the plan lacked that merit of continued profit which distinguishes the one in actual operation."

I did not understand him.

"With wrecked minds the victims would make good beggars," explained the doctor. "The wretches are sent from San Francisco to Philadelphia, where the danger of recognition is small, and are kept as beggars under the reliable agency of Mr. Joe Simpson and his mother; and your Removal Company has a steady income through their zeal. The blank-faced men whom you saw at Simpson's, as well as this poor girl, have been subjected to the peculiar treatment of the Removal Company, and are employed as beggars."

I think I hardly understood all of this at the time, for I was weak from a great strain, and nervously awry from a certain strange, wild joy for having Annette alive and under my care once more.

"Can you restore her to her former condition of mind?" I asked.

Gravely and slowly he made answer: "There is a bare possibility. . . . The plan must be heroic and desperate. . . . If it fails—death or complete dementia."

It came out afterward, in an investigation of Simpson's methods, that my poor Annette, whose innocence and sweetness must have been her guard against even the lowest brutality, had never been a mother; that was a deception practiced upon her to make her captivity surer.

"Ah," exclaimed Annette, upon emerging, after many days, from those

great depths, "I am still alive! Why did not Mr. Reiferth keep his promise? Have I been asleep long?"

Ay, more than a year, Annette; but the hideous dreams of that black and terrible time have left no stamp upon your memory!

The sweet, cool western wind and the generous sunshine come to California, bringing their blessings to the rich and the poor, the prosperous and

the unfortunate, the happy and the despairing; but I think that the gentle winds and the shining years bless with a special grace one happy home, which, born of suffering, of strange misunderstandings, of crime, of darkness, has issued forth into the broad yellow light that heaven sends, grateful, humble, inexpressibly content. That home is our's—Annette's and mine; for not alone have the church and the law made us man and wife.

